Interview with Dave Wennergren

Department of the Navy Chief Information Officer

Mentoring young professionals and guiding and inspiring the workforce is a top priority for the Navy-Marine Corps leadership team. In addition to technology certifications and academic degrees, CHIPS asked the DON CIO, Dave Wennergren, to talk about the skill sets and personal qualities needed to be a successful part of the Navy-Marine Corps team.

CHIPS: What is your definition of success?

Mr. Wennergren: Success is one of those things that is hard to quantify, but easy to see … if you look for the right things. Success is when an organization is effective; when the mission of an organization is achieved. Today, success is very rarely about personal accomplishment or ambition, but much more the result of teamwork. People who realize this do a much better job of building teams for success. People who are solely focused on personal success have a more difficult time because that kind of success is illusory and usually comes at the expense of others. Achieving success by bringing others along with you provides more value to the organization and is far more satisfying.

When I think back on my career, before my days as CIO, I was involved in regionalizing Navy shore infrastructure services to gain efficiencies and effectiveness. I led a team that went to a certain region to help develop a new organizational structure; one that could operate more effectively by sharing resources. About two or three years later I went back to that same region of the country and met with the folks that were actually working in the new streamlined organization. They described to me what they had done and how they had turned their idea into reality. Of course, they had no idea that I had led the team that initiated the regionalization plan; this was a new group of people.

From their viewpoint, it was their plan that they had accomplished, and I thought that was the true measure of the success of the effort. It was far more important that they felt the idea was theirs and they owned it, rather than remembering that some other group of people helped them create the idea. As a result, they had a strong interest in seeing the plan succeed. They were so proud of what they had done. They didn't know that I was part of the team that came up with that idea, and that was fine because the success of the organization is what is really important.

Sometimes personal goals and personal ambitions can stand in the way of trying to help people do the right thing. While it is not always obvious, it seems clear in retrospect that what is important is what you do to help make a team successful, what you do to help empower others and what you do to help train lead-

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ers. Giving people opportunities to understand their gifts and putting them to work is a trait of successful organizations.

CHIPS: What advice do you have for an individual just beginning a career, someone who wants to stand out in an organization?

Mr. Wennergren: I guess I would ask them what sort of results they want to achieve because success means so many things to so many people. Success can be measured by your position in an organization, your association with a team, your happiness in the work you do, the relationships you have made, or the people you have mentored.

Success should actually be the by-product of having achieved results. Everybody is not built for the same kind of job. Some people are better at supervising while others are better at technical skills. I would want to understand where their passion is and then help them think about the learning and professional opportunities, skills they could hone, and knowledge they need to gain to be able to fully take advantage of their skills and abilities.

If you are contributing the talents that you possess, in a way that makes you happy, then you will be successful. Follow your dreams. You'll spend a lot of time at work. If your career aligns with your gifts and your passion, then every hour you spend working will be both fulfilling and energizing.

CHIPS: What advice do you have for those who want to develop executive-level skills?

Mr. Wennergren: Interestingly, there are certain general skills that are really important to have. If you are going to be a senior manager, it is often far less important that you have profound technical knowledge and far more important that you

understand the organization, its mission and its culture. These are basic skills that are important no matter where you work. You need to understand how the personnel process works. You must hire good people and then motivate them, nurture them, sustain them and then help them to grow.

You need to have an understanding of how the financial and procurement processes work. You must understand what your own strengths and weaknesses are, and how to be a good leader. If you don't understand these things, then it will be difficult to rise above the ranks of being an expert in your field.

The kinds of challenges that face an organization like the Navy and Marine Corps are so broad, and they tend to cross traditional organizational boundaries. Therefore, people who get to leadership positions often get there because they have a broad set of management skills. Executive leadership is about being able to manage for results, recognizing how to lead others, how to get the most out of workers, and how to work across organizational boundaries to form teams that can coalesce around successful answers.

CHIPS: What are some of the common traits and skills of successful people?

Mr. Wennergren: My former boss, mentor and great friend, Dan Porter, once told me that 'A' people hire 'A' people and 'B' people hire 'C' people. Something that you often see in good leaders is the ability to recognize the strengths and skills of an individual so that you get the 'right people on the bus.'

If you don't have skills at finding good people and then energizing them, it is very difficult no matter how visionary you are. Finding good people and then putting them in a supportive environment where they can grow and excel, is one of the traits that great leaders that I have known exhibit.

Obviously, it is important to have leadership skills. While some skills may be innate, there are many things that you can learn and spend some time developing. You have to learn to listen and communicate well. These are basic skills that you see in leaders. You have to be able to communicate. That's why I often point to a book written by Howard Gardner, *The Power of Story Telling*. Gardner discusses how successful leaders are able to tell effective stories. They use stories to help people understand ideas, concepts and organizational vision.

Successful individuals know how to empower people because the higher you are in a leadership position, the less you can afford to micromanage the efforts of people. You will not only stop them from being the successes they could be, you will disenfranchise them and de-motivate them. You need to know when to coach, when to encourage, when to offer advice and when to get out of the way, and let the people who work for you go be the successes that they can be.

CHIPS: When you are selecting a book to recommend to the Navy-Marine Corps team, do you look at it as a kind of cookbook solution or are you saying that you have to pick and choose what you need? Do you use these books for inspiration?

Mr. Wennergren: I think it's a little bit of all those things. I think at the most basic level it's about cultivating a learning organization, an environment where learning is valued. We ask everybody that works in the CIO organization to do some type of learning experience each year, and we are really flexible as to what a learning experience might be. It could be taking a college class, taking a training course, or attending a conference or seminar. It should be something that helps you broaden your horizons and opens your mind to the art of the possible; something that gets you to step out of your comfort zone and broaden your horizons.

Sometimes, I have a secondary motivation when I recommend books. For example, when I tell people that I think that they should read the book *Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done* by Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan, part of my motivation is that we oftentimes have not done a good job at execution.

It's easy to get excited about a new idea, but then some of the initial excitement wears off and people want to move on to the next big idea rather than following through on the original idea, measuring its effectiveness and making sure that we are getting the results we desire. I often point out these books hoping that people will read and get some valuable lessons out of them.

Sometimes reading a book can help you have a common language so that you can talk about the issues that we sometimes have a hard time articulating. Sometimes it's about cookbooks, sometimes it's about stepping out of our comfort zones, but more often it is about coming up with ideas about the things that we ought to be thinking about to help an organization change.

CHIPS: Have any of these books changed the way you work?

Mr. Wennergren: I like to think that we grow each time we read and that we find something in each of these books. We, in the CIO office, read *Fish!* by Stephen C. Lundin, Harry Paul and John Christensen a couple of years ago. It's a great little story about being positive. It had some simple tips about how to be successful. The tips can be applied to your personal life and your professional life. The people that read *Fish!* together seemed to have this bonding experience. They began to talk about it, and its lessons started to permeate the attitude of the organization.

Reading together as a group is a powerful thing for an organization. We try to pick a couple of books that we are going to read together as an organization each year. We talk about it and incorporate

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the ideas contained in the book into our vocabulary at work. If you are not reading something that is helping you to improve, then you are probably not reading the right kind of books.

CHIPS: I've been reading about the Department's Human Capital Strategy, which is designed to ensure that the Department has the right people with the right skills for 21st century national security needs. What are some of the benefits of the Human Capital Strategy? Will it help the Navy-Marine Corps team in terms of professional development and career planning?

Mr. Wennergren: A well understood and articulated human capital strategy is crucial for a number of reasons. It will help to ensure that our 'total force' — Sailors, Marines, civilians and contractors — have the competencies essential to fight and win in the 21st century. Successful companies have long understood that an effective human capital strategy provides a tremendous competitive advantage, and the leadership of our Navy-Marine Corps team recognizes that this is true in our world as well.

In terms of the IM/IT workforce, our team leader, Ms. Sandy Smith and a number of her colleagues across the Department have done an outstanding job in developing a Department of the Navy strategy that addresses both workforce planning and human capital management. This work has been embraced by a number of other agencies and has proven very helpful in aligning people's skills, experiences and capabilities to the current and future IM/IT needs of the Department.

CHIPS: Is it important to have a well-structured career plan?

Mr. Wennergren: Somebody told me once that there are two schools of thought about managing your career. One is the very organized person who says, 'I'm going to do this for two years and then I am going to do that.' These people try to plan their whole life's journey. That works well for some people. Others take a much more seemingly chaotic approach to planning their careers.

But at the heart of the matter, it's about doing a good job and building up networks and having people recognize that you are doing a good job; and as a result, new opportunities present themselves. I don't know that there is one right answer. I know that I have clearly fallen more into the second camp than the first camp.

I think either path can be successful as long as you know yourself and know what you like to do so that you can develop the skills, find the opportunities and get involved in the activities that will help you get to the place you want to be. This can happen with a whole lot of advance planning or it can happen by just making the most of the opportunities that are presented to you. Both ways can get you to your goal of being successful, particularly if your measurement of success is working at something you really enjoy and where you feel like you are making a difference. CHIPS

Must-Reads from the DON CIO

David Wennergren, the Navy's chief information officer, has put together a recommended reading list for the Navy's information technology workforce.

√ *Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done by Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan*

√ *Leadership is an Art by Max Dupree*

√ *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap … and Others Don't by Jim Collins*

√ *First, Break All the Rules: What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently by Marcus Buckingham*

√ *The Power of Story Telling by Howard Gardner*

√ *Leading Change by John Kotter*

√ *The Power of Alignment: How Great Companies Stay Centered and Accomplish Extraordinary Things by George Labovitz and Victor Rosansky*

√ *The Thin Book of Appreciative Inquiry by Sue Annis Hammond*

√ *Who Moved My Cheese? An Amazing Way to Deal with Change in Your Work and in Your Life by Spencer Johnson*

√ *The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader: Becoming the Person Others Will Want to Follow by John Maxwell*

And finally, straight from the Department of the Navy's CIO team:

√ *The Power of Team: The Making of a CIO by Dan Porter, Alex Bennett, Ron Turner and Dave Wennergren.* This book from the leaders of the Department of the Navy CIO organization, shares the experiences and insights about constructing and implementing an agenda for the newly formed Chief Information Office. It serves as a reference for organizations that are charged with the responsibility of implementing and managing information technology or leading change in an IT organization.

The Power of Team: The Making of a CIO is available from the DON CIO Web site at http://www.doncio.navy.mil/. Click the Products tab and select "View Online" to download the PDF. Select "Request This Product" and complete the online request form to request a hard copy.